Information systems and databases

4.1. Access points

Overview

Up to this point, we have been concerned with getting data into metadata representations of information objects. We need to address the concepts related to accessing the data once they are in the records. This module discusses the concept of access points and their function in an organization system. Subsequent modules will go into more detail on how we treat specific access points that are under authority control.

Access and access points

To find a record in the database, users search the database using one or more access points. We define access point as a designated area of the record that can be searched. Closely tied to the concept of access point is the concept of indexing. Unfortunately, the concept of access point in the library community is confusing because at times it refers to the part of the record available for searching (e.g., author, title, or subject information), and at other times it refers to the actual data value held in fields in the record. So, we need to distinguish between:

- The structural part of the record (e.g., a field) that can be searched
- The data contained in a structural part of a record.

In the traditional library card catalog, the access are author, title, and subject, and three physical sections of the catalog contain cards for these access points. Users work their way through the cards looking for the name of an author, the title of a book, or a subject. For example, let's say the card catalog has a representation for our textbook, *The Organization of Information*. A complete bibliographic record (card) is created with all the pertinent information about the book. Because catalogers want to allow users to search in the card catalog by author, title, or subject to find this book, they make copies of the card and type at the top of each copy the author's name or the book title or a subject heading. For this book, there would be four cards in the catalog:

- Card with author's name: Taylor, Arlene G., 1941-
- Card with title: The organization of information
- Card with subject heading: Information science
- Card with subject heading: Information science--United States

Each card is filed in the appropriate place in the catalog, and the user has four possible places to find the bibliographic record for this book.
Access points in an online database

The card catalog only allows users to find bibliographic records using author, title, or subject information. An online database or online library catalog is not so limited. Potentially, any field in a record can be an access point. Look at UNT's library catalog: <http://iii.library.unt.edu/>. What access points (or searchable areas of the record) are offered?

- Title
- Author
- Subject
- Author/Title
- Keyword
- Journal Title
- Call Numbers
- Other Standard Numbers.

Other library online catalogs offer similar ways to search the database.

In your Inmagic database, you choose which fields to index. Indexing makes a field searchable, or makes it an access point. How do you choose which fields to index? Your decision should be based on how you expect your users to search for information. Just because you can make any field in your database searchable doesn't mean it should be. For example, let's say you have as part of your metadata scheme an element for publication information and you structure that element into three record fields: publisher's name, publisher's address, and publisher's telephone number. Will your users want to search by publisher's telephone number? If not, then it is not appropriate to index that field and thus make it searchable. However, if you determined that your users would search by telephone number, then by all means index that field and make it an access point. The bottom line is that your choice of access points should be driven by your understanding of users' information seeking and searching behavior.

Traditional access points in library catalogs

We said above that author, title, and subject are the traditional access points in library catalogs. We can refine this a bit more. Library catalogers use a standard tool, the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) to do descriptive cataloging (i.e., the part of cataloging that focuses on the container). Also included in AACR are several chapters related to access points. Specifically, AACR address four types of access points:

- Names of people who perform certain functions
- Names of corporate bodies related to the bibliographic item
- Titles
- Series
Because AACR deals only with the physical container and descriptive cataloging, it does not address subject access points. Another way to think of these four types of access points is:

- Names of people (authors, editors, composers, actors)
- Names of corporate bodies (authors, publishers)
- Names of places (geographic names)
- Names of information objects (titles)
- Names of groups of objects (series, sets)

AACR has the following chapters:

- 21: Choice of access points
- 22: Personal Names
- 23: Geographic Names
- 24: Corporate Bodies
- 25: Uniform Titles

Each chapter has a set of rules addressing specific access points. But most importantly, these rules help the cataloger to set up an authorized form of a person's name, an organization's name, a uniform title, etc. And this is where AACR provides a bridge between descriptive information about an information object and authority control over specific access points to assist the user in bringing together all items related to a specific name, which is called collocation.

Because AACR has rules for establishing an authorized form of a name in the context of an access point, there is confusion about whether an access point in AACR is the searchable record field or the data contained in a searchable field. Again, we define access point as a searchable field in the record, and the field may contain data that have been handled in a special way, namely, through authority work.

**Summary**

In this module, we discussed the concept of access point and reviewed the basic access points usually available in a library catalog. We also suggested that in an online database, any field in the record can serve as an access point, because we define access point as a searchable field in the record. A field becomes an access point by choosing to index it. Other modules give a more detailed discussion of authority work and authority control.